

Peace Operations : A Case Study of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

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Introduction

Security analysts seem unanimous in their view that future engagements of the United Nations (UN) will predominantly be in the management of intra state conflicts. Dramatic developments in Cambodia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda just to mention a few, left devastating consequences for a world that was expecting peace dividends after the end of the Cold War. The West has been accused of "double standards" in its response to conflicts in different regions.

In circumstances when the UN is lethargic in its response, and human suffering is spiraling out of control, it is natural and desirable that "someone" acts. In this context, the experience of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Liberia and Sierra Leone is an important and novel regional contribution to the understanding of regional peace operations in co-operation with the UN. ECOWAS initiative has been largely hailed as a "success story" and is proposed by many as a benchmark for similar regional initiatives. Against the backdrop of regional participation, this paper examines the contribution of ECOWAS and lessons learnt thereof. The West African conflicts are extremely complex, intertwined and interdependent on each other. Under the circumstances, therefore, it is no small achievement that at least temporarily in Liberia and in Sierra Leone there is some peace. The big question is: can ECOWAS and the UN exploit the latest window of opportunity?

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXIV, No. 558, October-December 2004.

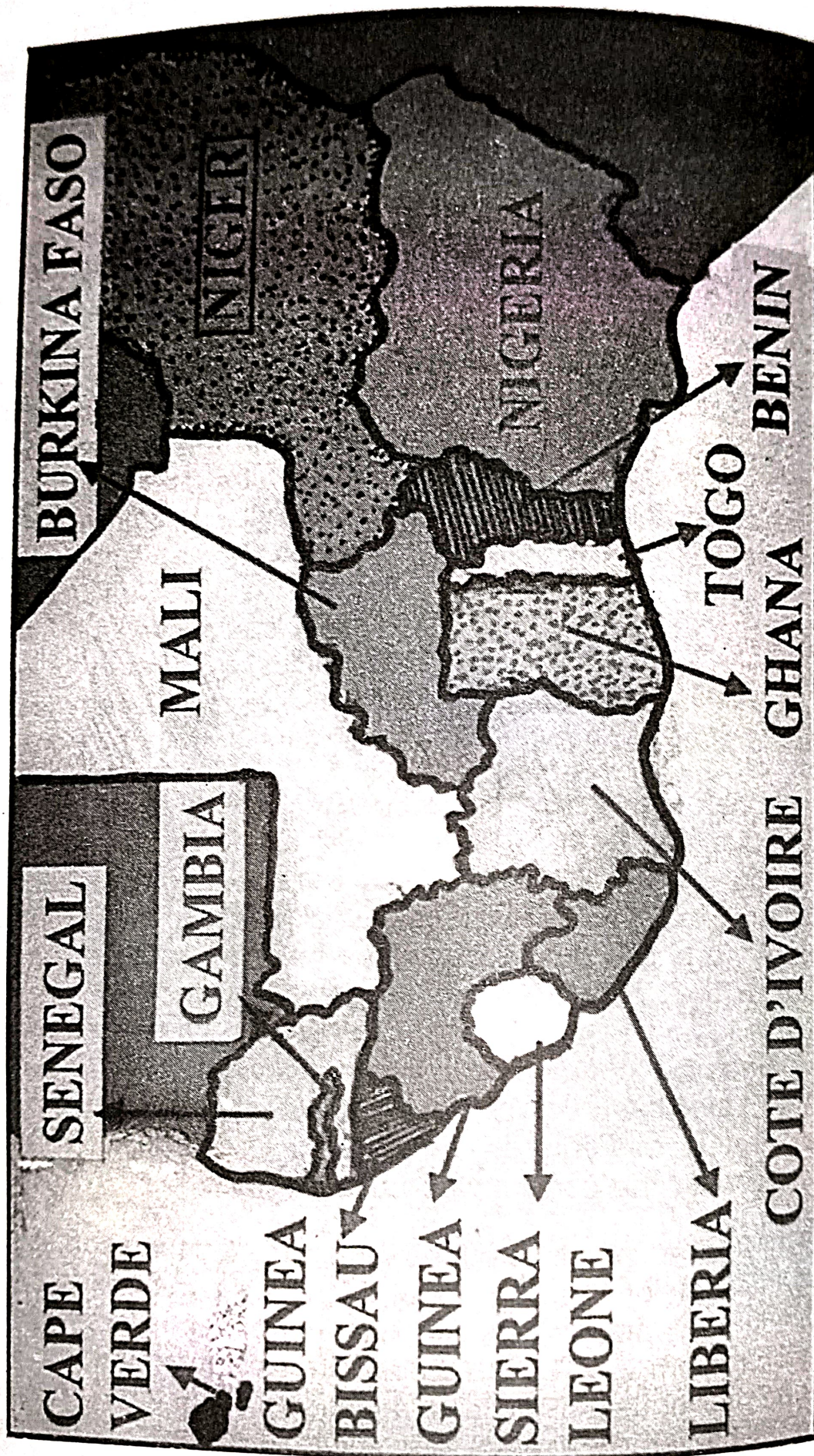
ECOWAS and Security in West Africa – An Appraisal

ECOWAS was formed in 1975 to integrate West Africa's economic potential for sub-regional growth (Map 1). Although there was no defence clause at the time of its formation, it soon appreciated the importance of security to the realisation of its identified economic objectives. In the post-Cold War era, the Liberian crisis provided the first test case of Africa's assumption of responsibility for conflict management and resolution. The ECOWAS, was the first sub-regional organisation to manage the dispute. The West African conflict started in December 1989, when a rebel movement, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor, launched an attack on the government of the late President Samuel Doe. Within months, the structures of governance had been destroyed and civilians became victims in a war that was prosecuted without respect for any convention. This propelled the sub-regional organisation, ECOWAS, into intervening in the conflict. ECOWAS's involvement in Liberia (and later in Sierra Leone) had an intricate politics, a summary of which is worth providing because of its relevance to the complexities inherent in sub-regional involvement in conflict management.

Even before the dispatch, the peacekeeping mission faced a string of controversies, including the political and legal ramifications of the action. The political problems were rooted in the division within the organisation as to the need to dispatch the peacekeeping force and the possible hidden agenda behind Nigeria's desire to spearhead the initiative. The organisation had no practical experience in addressing a complex emergency of this magnitude. The countries that contributed troops for the mission were also not known to have past history of military co-operation, either in a peacekeeping mission or joint military training. ECOWAS intervention into the conflict was uncoordinated.

ECOWAS's diplomatic efforts to end the Liberian conflict saw the organisation overseeing about 14 peace agreements on the Liberian conflict and several on the Sierra Leone conflict. The principal problem ECOWAS faced in these agreements was the continued proliferation of factions. Although most of the agreements were later broken, ECOWAS was still able to keep all the sides

MAP 1 : Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)



Members : Benin, Burkino Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

in the conflict talking throughout the war. Without doubt, the most prominent aspect of ECOWAS's involvement in Liberia and Sierra Leone was the dispatch of a regional peacekeeping force known as the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990.¹ One of the reasons for this prominence is that it was the first regional peacekeeping initiative after the end of the Cold War.

There were a number of complications with the exercise, some of which are germane to understanding the complexities of sub-regional conflict management strategies. First, the force became confused about its role in Liberia. It went there in the "traditional" peacekeeping mode, at a time when this was clearly inappropriate. It was some time before the force began to appreciate the complexities of the situation and realised the need to alternate between peace enforcement and peacekeeping. Second, further complications occurred as Nigerian domestic military politics became intertwined with the ECOMOG peacekeeping operation. Third, the military mission was sent in the name of a regional organisation that was not united on the need for a peacekeeping mission. Fourth, the military operation had limited fund to meet the peacekeeping challenge it had undertaken.

The activities of the ECOMOG force have attracted criticism. First, the force has been accused of being corrupt and of looting Liberian and Sierra Leonean resources. The second was "amorous affairs", which many ECOMOG soldiers developed with Liberian and Sierra Leonean women, to almost endemic proportions. Despite these rough edges and with some embarrassing operational reverses, ECOMOG peace operations generally succeeded in ending the carnage that characterised Liberia and Sierra Leone before its entrance.

Close on the heels of Liberian crisis came the civil war in Sierra Leone where a rebel movement, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) under Foday Sankoh took up arms against the central government, directly supported by Charles Taylor in Liberia. Again, going into the causes of the war here will serve no useful purpose, except to say that it was intertwined in a number of ways with the civil war in neighbouring Liberia. ECOWAS's involvement in Sierra

Leone was similar, in many aspects, to that in Liberia. While trying to use diplomatic means to resolve the crisis, ECOMOG also undertook a military operation in Sierra Leone. Although this military operation was less extensive, its complications, especially at the latter stages, were no less intense than Liberia's. On the whole, ECOWAS has led all African regional organisations in conflict management in the post-Cold War era. While several of its actions have been imperfect, they clearly show how intimately regional and sub-regional organisations can be willing to get involved for their collective security, despite inherent obstacles.

Shortcomings of ECOWAS Initiative in Conflict Management in West Africa

Structural. It is evident that ECOWAS is an economic organisation, not specifically designed for peacekeeping. It did not have some of the structural facilities needed for conflict management.

Financial. This has been the biggest problem with ECOWAS and greatly impaired ECOMOG peacekeeping operations. Even this was made possible just because of a lead nation (Nigeria).

Political Divisions and "Side-Taking". This has become a source of concern in recent years, especially as only countries within a region or sub-region are willing to resolve crisis in their neighbourhood. This problem was apparent in Liberia, where Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso were believed to have taken different sides in the conflict. This impacted on the ECOMOG operation, as the conflicting parties exploited the situation to prolong the war.

Regional Hegemons. Regional hegemons are a reality in most regions. For obvious reasons, the smaller nations often have "love-hate" relationship with them. In times of crisis, these hegemons may often find themselves challenged to take a lead role in their regions and the degree of their involvement can make the difference between preventing collapse and complete destruction, human suffering and anarchy. Despite their advantages, however, regional hegemons may themselves be

stumbling blocks in the peace or bringing durable peace process if they are seen as partial or have vested interest in the conflict or perceived. Nigeria's sincerity in ECOMOG operations was suspected by other ECOWAS members as it itself one of the parties to the conflict.

Legal Relationship with the Global Organisation and Legitimacy. Regional organisations face a problem of legitimacy if they are acting without the authorisation of the UN, particularly where the action entails use of force. The ECOMOG operation initially faced this problem when its legitimacy was challenged. The operation only received the sanction of the UN retroactively.

Command and Control Operational Problems. Operations conducted in response to conflict encountered problems. Division in command, due to separate provision of logistic support by contributing states made control of the ECOMOG operation extremely difficult.

Involvement of the UN in ECOWAS Efforts

A complex relationship marked by 'mutual suspicion' exists between the UN and ECOWAS. Most Africans believe that the UN has not taken African conflicts seriously. Specific accusations against the UN include 'late involvement', 'flamboyant lifestyle exhibited by the UN staff' and not 'encouraging local initiatives' especially with regard to conflict prevention and resolution. The UN on its part sees such conflicts as failure of regional organisations due to their corrupt politics and deliberate aggravations for maximising material gains. Nevertheless, the UN has kept its involvement with ECOWAS efforts in various forms.²

Regional Peacekeeping and Peace Enforcement: Recommendations

The weaknesses in ECOMOG operations have been analysed and number of recommendations made through various studies and forums. Some of these are highlighted here. Regional and sub-regional organisations like ECOWAS (in particular those outside Europe), should receive support through the UN, both at the beginning and for the duration of the peacekeeping operations.

Further, there is a need for a UN standing operating procedures (SOPs) in different areas of peacekeeping and peace building, which give guidance on co-operation of the UN with a regional or sub-regional organisation.

The increasing tendency to use regional organisations to deal with security problems raises the issue of who has authority to mandate the use of force. In Kosovo, the UN was visibly bypassed and there are serious questions about the precedent that some believe has been set. Several Asian countries, as well as countries in Africa and Latin America feel uncomfortable with this development. It was noted that some regional organisations, like the Organisation of American States (OAS), are withdrawing from a position of regarding themselves as capable of authorising the use of force, while others like ECOWAS are asserting that authority.

For effective coordination good division of labour before the start of the operation is important. A major area for improvement between the UN and regional bodies is better delineation of mandates and tasks by establishing appropriate forums. A proper division of labour has to be supplemented by efficient, central co-ordination. Good collection and analysis of information and intelligence is a precondition for good planning and effective action. Parallel planning and deployment of the military and civil presence is an absolute must. Finally, despite the growing focus on the use of regional and sub-regional organisations, and despite setbacks in recent years and weaknesses, the UN remains central and vital to international peace and security. Its universal legal status, with its numerous agencies including the practical work they undertake seem indispensable.

Future of Regional and Sub-Regional Peacekeeping Operations

Due to the complex inter-play of myriad local actors, and the inability of nations to respond effectively to call for help and the growing reluctance of powerful nations to commit troops to 'risky' situations, the UN will increasingly have to rely on regional organisations. But regional security arrangements do not enjoy the same legitimacy that the UN does. Consequently, issues such as objectivity and impartiality come into focus. For this, regional

arrangements will be in need of the UN. Thus, based on comparative strength, a complementary and cooperative division of labour between the UN and regional arrangements is likely to surface, with the UN focusing on multidimensional or multifunctional operations, and regional security arrangements concentrating on a peace enforcement military role. Alongside, bilateral and multilateral arrangements between these organisations and the powerful western nations aimed at "capacity building" in conflict management is also likely to increase, and will prove complimentary.

The experience of the 1990s suggests that the time of the regional organisations has come. This view was echoed by the former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in his Agenda for Peace initiative, when he noted, "Regional organisations ... possess a potential that should be utilised in serving the function (of) preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, peacemaking and post conflict peace building... under the charter, the security council has and will continue to have primary responsibility for international peace and security but regional actions as a matter of decentralisation, delegation and co-operation, with the UN efforts could not only lighten the burden of the council, but also contribute to a deeper sense of participation, consensus and democratisation of internal affairs".

But as the foregoing discussion concludes, while this may indeed be true, such initiatives are fraught with numerous difficulties that are especially serious in the case of sub-regions such as West Africa. The ECOWAS experience proves that 'regional-politics' and 'narrow interests' are frequent in such initiatives. This weakness when exacerbated by lack of international support tends to become a "part of the problem". Paradoxically, however, this is often the only viable alternative. Regional players by the fact of having principal interest in the prevention and resolution of regional conflict are more willing to act fast and act tough, even at the cost of likely casualties.

To enhance the efforts and effectiveness of regional and sub-regional organisations in peace operations, the UN in co-operative partnership, will have to strengthen their "capacity" to act.³ Towards

this end, following questions merit serious deliberation: what is the state of the regional and sub-regional force and its "needs" to be effective? To what extent can the UN equip the peacekeeping force of a weak region or sub-region? What should the UN involvement in the long-term preparation of handicapped regions or sub-regions in the peacekeeping process be? The ECOWAS experience promises to be a useful test model to get some relevant answers.

End Notes

1. It stayed in Liberia until 1998 and in Sierra Leone until early 2000.
2. The UN interfaced with ECOWAS efforts by deploying first, the observer missions and later a peacekeeping mission. The United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) is the first UN peacekeeping mission undertaken in cooperation with a peacekeeping operation already set up by another organisation. Established in September 1993 by the Security Council, the Mission terminated in September 1997. The Security Council established UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) for an initial period of six months on 7 July when all parties to the conflict signed an agreement in Lome to end hostilities and form a government of national unity. On 22 October 1999, the Security Council established the United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to cooperate with the government and other parties in implementing the Lome Peace Agreement and to assist in the implementation of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration plan. Since then its mandate and size has been revised several times.
3. This has also been most recently affirmed at the G-8 Summit in Avion, France, which has called for "Capacity Building in Peace Keeping" in Africa. There is also suggestion at assisting in "Peace Building" and improving other structural aspects. Apparently, significant effort (especially by the US) is underway to enhance the peacekeeping and peace enforcement capability of ECOMOG.

ADDRESS UPDATE

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CHANGE OF ADDRESS ON OCCURENCE**